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ABSTRACT

At one time, Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) was virtually the only place students could come to study fashion design, merchandising, and buying. Currently, 22 institutions offer degrees in fashion design, and almost as many offer fashion buying and merchandising. This new competitive environment is making it necessary for FIT to become and remain distinctive by making the "business of teaching" its highest priority; by re-acknowledging that teaching is FIT's central function; and by demystifying the teaching process itself. A workable system of supports based on new relationships between teachers and their colleagues, students, administrators, and specialists needs to be created. Elements of a teaching program functioning with this support system would be: (1) regular, detailed observations of and discussions about teaching by colleagues, visitors, specialists, and students; (2) a systematic sharing of knowledge about the learning process; (3) the establishment of a campus teaching institute to organize these activities; and (4) new methods of certifying student mastery of a subject without traditional grading. An example of an outstanding teaching institution is the Harvard Business School, which uses the case method of teaching to bring "business reality" into the classroom. Though the case method may not be appropriate for FIT, the institution should pay the same kind of attention to defining teaching goals and matching them with appropriate teaching strategies. (UCM)

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The Business of Teaching

by

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August 25, 1986

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President
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Address to Faculty
August 25, 1986

THE BUSINESS OF TEACHING

As is my habit, I've spent much of the summer brooding about the future of F.I.T. Let me begin by repeating, as a context for any critical observations, that F.I.T.--thanks almost entirely to our remarkable faculty--has become the outstanding institution in its field in the world. I think it would be hard to find a disinterested observer who would dispute that. But our dominance demands, as I have said so many times before, that we be more self-critical than ever before. Our archenemy is complacency.

We need to confront the fact that we are working in a much more competitive environment than ever before. We grew very fast. We were highly successful. We are highly visible. But we have no monopoly, natural or conferred, on what we do. Perhaps inspired by our pioneering, other institutions are moving aggressively into our field. There was a time when we were virtually the only place students could come for fashion design. For years we were the only institution offering work in fashion buying and merchandising. We were the first in our field to offer a two-year A.A.S. degree program with an additional two-year bachelor's degree option.

But now we have competitors in all these areas. Twenty-two institutions offer degrees in fashion design. Almost as many offer

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fashion buying and merchandising. A growing number of two-year institutions offer four-year options, many in the majors we offer.

This new competitive environment is making new and unfamiliar demands on us. We are even competing for a different kind of student. Forty-three percent of our full-time day students are over 20 years of age when they arrive here; sixteen percent are over 25.

We will continue our predominance only if we continue to be distinctive--unlike any other institution. We are no longer distinctive because of what we do. That day is gone forever. We must now become and remain distinctive because of how we do what we do. And, in an educational institution, that means not what we teach but how we teach.

I was surprised and chagrined to find, thumbing through the file of talks I have made to this faculty over the years, that I have not spoken to you specifically about the business of teaching for 12 years. I have spoken to you about virtually everything else under the sun except what we are here for: to teach. I want to propose that we resolve now to give our highest priority to the business of teaching.

Teaching is higher education's most central function and its most neglected. Teaching is not often talked about. It is unusual on any college campus to hear a really intelligent discussion of teaching as teaching, and a useful article about teaching is a rarity. At the various academic conferences and meetings I attend,

teaching is never on the agenda. It is as if the teachers who attend these sessions take pains to disguise the fact that they are teachers.

Critic Jacques Barzun, commenting on teaching's low priority in American universities, wrote: "The highest prize in the teaching profession is an assignment that requires no teaching." This is, in part, a reaction to the content vs. method controversy in elementary and secondary education. For years there was an almost insane emphasis on teaching methods and an alarming de-emphasis on content. Teachers, carefully instructed in the techniques of teaching, confused a whole generation of students when they tried to teach subjects they knew nothing about.

The higher educators' reaction against excessive emphasis on method in pre-college education has led to an almost equally destructive neglect of the business of teaching. Every year thousands of advanced-degree holders or experienced professional practitioners in every field--humanities, literature, music, plastic arts--begin what will become lifelong careers as teachers. But most of them know next to nothing about the history of education, or about the complex and fascinating verified facts of learning, memory, and habit; or about temperamental differences in verbal and visual powers; or the literature of the psychology of perception; or anything that will help them in the immensely difficult business of imparting knowledge.

Yet we all know that teaching doesn't come naturally. The great scholar is not necessarily a good teacher. Nor is the great designer, the great marketer, or the great entrepreneur.

But we can change that at F.I.T. if we want to. The first step, I think, is simply to re-acknowledge that teaching is our central function, and second, to affirm that teaching is a perfectible pursuit. We need to remind each other that, whatever our position at F.I.T., we are all here in support of one function--teaching.

We need to de-mystify the teaching process--to expose certain stubborn myths about it. Some believe, for example, that teaching cannot be taught. William Faulkner, about to begin a spell of teaching at Princeton, said: "Nobody can teach anybody else anything."

Others try to revitalize teaching in ways that are bound to fail. There is emerging, for example, the growing evaluation cult. It seems perfectly clear to me that while evaluation may be useful for other reasons, the teaching process will not improve simply by measuring it more often and more carefully.

Critics of the teaching process often look vainly for remedies in the wrong places--new curricula, new styles of teaching, ever-more-elaborate forms of governance, or in the endless search for an undefinable relevance. Others argue alternately that helping

professors teach more effectively is unnecessary or impossible. But I believe we have only begun to explore ways to help teachers teach more effectively.

We know mainly what doesn't work. We have often tried to improve teaching by vague emotional exhortations to rededicate ourselves to the task, or by offering technical tips on how to teach, by restlessly reshuffling subject matter, and even offering prizes, as if teaching were a kind of Miss America Pageant. There is no evidence that these methods have had much effect.

What has not been done and what desperately needs to be done is to fashion a workable system of supports based on a solid framework of new relationships between teachers and their colleagues, students, administrators, and specialists in the learning process.

Some institutions have made some progress by initiating programs of assisted self-study. Some departments at F.I.T. still require an observation training period before making a faculty appointment. These programs, if they are well conducted, can dramatically increase a faculty's self-awareness about the kind of teaching they would most like to do. But this renewed self-awareness may simply reinforce frustration unless colleges create structures through which these newly-illuminated ambitions can be pursued. Such teaching programs have one or more of these elements:

- 1) regular, detailed observations of and discussions about teaching by colleagues, visitors, specialists and students;
- 2) a systematic sharing of knowledge about the learning processes;
- 3) the establishment of a campus teaching institute to coordinate and assist these activities;
- 4) experiments with new methods of certifying a student's mastery of a subject which free the teacher from the traditional necessity of grading his or her own students.

Any such efforts toward reform must acknowledge certain difficulties inherent in the business of teaching. While there is a rich suggestive literature on the business of teaching, there are no certain guides to follow.

Philosopher Glenn Gray says that the main task of the teacher is to show the relevance of particular knowledge. Relevance is simple and direct if the subject is how to change a tire or rope a calf or sew a seam. But it is a formidable challenge if the subject is archeology or metaphysics or creative design.

John Stuart Mill contended that students need at least once to confront subjects with utterly no external appeal--subjects, as Aristotle said, "in which there is no natural sweetness." Jerome Bruner said it is not the task of the teacher to engage established interests in his students, but to create new ones.

Teaching has sometimes been called a performing art. Like drama or the dance, it happens and is gone. But there are special

differences: Teachers almost always work alone, and, unlike other performing artists, teachers are remarkably insulated from criticism. In fact, performer/teachers usually judge or critique their audiences--it is rarely the other way around.

So, while we know that teachers draw primary satisfaction from evidence of the effectiveness of their teaching, they rarely know if they are doing well or poorly. Teachers must rely for response on an essentially captive audience. They rarely get help from trained observers and precious little from colleagues. And students, so far as I know, are never methodically trained to judge the quality of the teaching they encounter, despite the fact we ask for student evaluations each year.

A foundation-financed group which studied college teaching extensively put the matter with a cruel clarity: "Teaching not only reverses ordinary patterns of criticism, but it also occurs in a sort of pedagogical amateurs' hour. In a profession otherwise notable for its requirements, prerequisites, hurdles, and elaborate dossiers, skills needed for effective teaching are treated off-handedly, as if mere imitation of graduate school models were enough....Universities have an obligation to help their staff and students monitor their own intellectual history as it is being made--in its failure as well as in its accomplishment--reflecting upon learning and the resources that help it occur."

I have spent some time lately in search of outstanding teaching institutions. And I offer to you as a provocative

example--not as a model, I hasten to add--the Harvard Business School. It was for decades the unquestioned leader in business education and is still probably the number-one institution in that mushrooming field.

I think, however, the reasons for the success of the Harvard Business School may be misunderstood. Yes, it is attached to our oldest and most revered university. It is exceptionally large. It has a world-famous faculty. But I think all these are less important than an uncommon dedication by the Harvard Business School to the business of teaching. That dedication, which began in the school's earliest days, is probably the principal cause of its continuing distinction.

Harvard, of course, is known for its use of the case method, but the business school did not simply borrow the case method from the pre-existing Harvard Law School. The use of the case method is a special case of a more general case: a continuing, systematic, highly disciplined search for how the particular body of material they have chosen to teach is best taught.

The case method brings into the classroom hundreds of slices of business reality. Why? Because, the school says, "Analysis and action are fused in the case method. The need to act on incomplete knowledge is the essence of the manager's task....The case method demands an active intellectual and emotional response from the student. A skillfully guided case discussion is a reality similar in certain essential qualities to the real world of business

decision making. Students must observe, listen, diagnose, decide, intervene. The discussion involves competition, collaboration, compromise and persuasion."

I hope you will understand that I am not in any sense a partisan of the case method. But I think we should pay the same kind of attention to defining our teaching goals and thinking through with a similar precision the teaching methods appropriate to them. Obviously, they will not be the same as Harvard's. They will not be the same in one F.I.T. department as in another.

We are a strong institution because we know why we teach what we teach. We will become stronger still if we become equally conscious of how we teach what we teach.

As we have grown bigger and older, we are no longer the small, happy family we were when I came here 15 years ago. Inevitably, we are becoming specialized, fragmented, and compartmentalized. I believe a renewed interest in the business of teaching could be a deeply unifying concern, bringing us closer together again in the pursuit of ways to improve the performance of our common, central task.

I also believe that any effort to improve our teaching will best be pursued as a common, somewhat institutionalized effort. I do not know exactly what form it should take. I do know that I will give such an effort the fullest measure of moral, administrative, and financial support.

Let us begin this way: I want to ask all of you to let me know--formally or informally--whatever ideas you have for how we may best proceed to give maximum vitality to our teaching effort. Tell me what you need or what you think might work. Let's devote some divisional meetings to the topic. Do we need a formal campus-wide institute on teaching? Is there a better alternative? Give me your ideas without restraint.

Meanwhile, I will put my own thoughts and ideas together in a more orderly way and consult such experts as there are across the country if you want them. Then we can decide what to do next.

And now I want to tell you how uncertain I feel when I discuss teaching with this splendid faculty. I speak to you only because I would not like to leave anything undone that might make this great teaching faculty greater still--as an expression of our deep personal and professional commitment to provide excellence in education for working people.

POSTSCRIPT: During the 1986-87 academic year, a Teaching Institute was formed at F.I.T. to establish a college-wide program of faculty development. It is made up of junior and senior faculty chosen by the Faculty Association from across the college, including the

divisions of Art and Design, Business and Technology, Liberal Arts, and Student Affairs, with representatives from Library/Media Services.

Among its projects so far, The Teaching Institute has:

1. Identified pedagogical skills that require enhancement, instructional technologies that can be used effectively in the classroom, areas of course content that require greater currency and rigor.
2. Identified professional development activities already available on a departmental, divisional, or college-wide basis that can be drawn upon to fulfill recognized needs. These include faculty manuals, inter-divisional conversations, and college-wide colloquia.
3. Outlined a multifaceted and comprehensive program of faculty development now available to all full-time and part-time faculty. Faculty from different disciplines and with varying needs are able to make use of the program's features which are most individually useful and relevant to them.
4. Established departmental in-service committees to plan and implement faculty development programs on the department level.
5. Set up a resource center to provide faculty with the means to meet personal professional development objectives. Available resources include printed and audio/visual materials, as well as research findings on teaching techniques and programs.

To supplement the activities of the Teaching Institute, in March 1987 President Feldman invited all members of the faculty with twenty or more years of full-time teaching at F.I.T. to participate in a Senior Faculty Retreat. The off-campus weekend included group discussions on "Assessing F.I.T.'s Past Strengths and Weaknesses" and "Senior Faculty as Academic Leaders"; divisional conversations to consider important issues for the future within the various disciplines; and a meeting to discuss plans for the college's next twenty years.

During the 1987-88 academic year, F.I.T.'s junior faculty will go on a retreat to discuss their views of the college's future. The two faculty perspectives will serve as a basis for continued college-wide development and planning.

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